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Improvement Plan: Add Water

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San Bernardino aims to protect and give a boost to its downtown with lakes and streams. But residents who will be displaced vow to fight.

By Hugo Martín
Times Staff Writer

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Venice has the canals. San Francisco has the Golden Gate Bridge. The city of San Bernardino, known primarily for its rail lines and an abandoned Air Force base, is hoping to create its own shimmering landmark — a network of lakes and streams — to revitalize the city's beleaguered downtown.

The latest version of the plan, unveiled at a community workshop Wednesday, calls for a 47-acre lake, which would displace more than 350 homes, businesses and churches just north of the city's civic center. The lake would be nearly 40% bigger than the one proposed in previous plans.

The main objective of the project, supporters say, is to drain millions of gallons of underground water that threaten to turn the soil in downtown San Bernardino into quicksand during an earthquake.

But city officials concede that they also hope the city of 185,000 residents can gain a new image with the construction of two alluring lakes bordered by lakeside homes and connected by several babbling streams.

The plan to expand the proposed water bodies, however, was blasted by some of the residents in the blue-collar neighborhood next to Interstate 215 that would be leveled and flooded to make way for the 12-foot-deep lake. This larger lake would uproot 255 single-family homes, 15 apartment buildings and 50 businesses and churches, according to preliminary studies.

"I'm very disappointed," Lillice Andreson, president of the Feldheym Neighborhood Assn., said at a meeting of the San Bernardino Regional Water Resources Authority, a joint-powers panel that is spearheading the project. "It shows a lack of concern for the neighbors."

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The project, which has been in the works for more than five years, is still in the initial study phase. But the appeal of the project has grown in the last few years with the continued closure of several downtown storefronts and news that the last major anchor is abandoning the city's struggling Carousel Mall in September.

Though city leaders expressed concern over relocating hundreds of residents, they said they are eager to move ahead with the project that they hope will solve several economic, safety and environmental problems for the city.

San Bernardino is on an underground lake. In spring, water levels can rise to within 5 feet of the surface. City officials fear that in an earthquake the wet underground soil could give way under hundreds of buildings.

The city also sits on two of the most dangerous faults in the world: the San Andreas and the San Jacinto. Officials say that by pumping out the groundwater, they can treat it, clean it and, perhaps, sell it to the Metropolitan Water District.

"I will reluctantly go along with evaluating this proposed alternative because we have no choice," said San Bernardino City Councilwoman Susan Lien Longville, a member of the panel.

San Bernardino Mayor Judith Valles, also a panel member, said she shares Lien Longville's concern about destroying an entire neighborhood for the project but was frustrated by the slow pace of the project's approval process. "I would like to proceed with the next step," she said.

A draft environmental study is scheduled to be completed this fall. The project is expected to include a smaller, 5-acre lake south of the civic center in a largely uninhabited area abutting Interstate 215. Plans to connect the two lakes with streams through the city's civic center are pending.

When the project was first unveiled about five years ago, it was a more ambitious plan that included several lakes connected by streams and waterways over a 316-acre area. But in the last two years, neighborhood opposition has forced city officials to significantly whittle the plan down.

Now the proposed lake north of the civic center is the biggest and most controversial element of the plan. The joint-powers panel hired an Ontario consulting firm to study a 34-acre lake that would displace 144 single-family homes, 12 apartment buildings and 37 businesses and churches. On Wednesday, Kevin Thomas, the manager of the project for RBF Consulting, recommended the panel instead consider a 47-acre lake that is less prone to fluctuating water levels and would require less clay to line the bottom.

Several of the residents whose homes would be razed to make room for the lake vowed to fight the plan.

"We have no intention of moving," said Matt Owen, who lives on 10th Street, near the middle of the proposed lake.

"It's going to affect quite a lot of people," said Steven Veloz, whose home also is within the proposed lake boundaries. "It's a bad thing."

Aurelio Vallejo, pastor of the Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana, a Baptist church that would be demolished to make way for the lake, said he has already scouted the area for a new church for his congregation. But he said the only church facilities he could find in the area are too small and too

expensive.

"If we relocate, we want something better than what we have now," he told the panel.

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